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Military Connected Youth and Bullying

According to the U.S. Department of Defense , in 2023 there were 1.5 million children and youth with parents who serve in the active duty military, National Guard, and Reserve forces. Military-connected children and youth face unique challenges that may impact their risk for bullying. For example, they can experience stressors related to the demands of military life and parental deployment – like changes in family roles and responsibilities, increased responsibility at home, parental separation, financial stress, worry over a deployed parent's safety, and secondary post-traumatic war trauma.

Frequent Moves and Challenges with Connectedness

Many military families move frequently due to changes in assignments. In addition to the stresses of moving, they may experience changes in their family roles and responsibilities due to deployment. Frequent moves can impact student's academics and connectedness to peers, relationships with other adult role models like teachers and staff, and engagement in their community and activities. In addition to settling into a new home, they have to adjust to different school environments, policies, peers, and teachers, as well as unfamiliar community settings and cultures. It may be difficult for them to adapt to another unfamiliar environment and form connections, while also feeling the loss of the home and community they left behind. Connectedness with caring, pro-social adults and other military peers who "get it" and activities can help prevent bullying and other forms of youth violence.

A Deployed Parent

Anxiety and stress are factors that may increase the risk of bullying. Another study showed significant increases in stress for children and youth whose parent was or is deployed. A child can feel worried, anxious, and vulnerable. Adolescents and older teens may experience even greater

stress than their younger siblings because they often take on more responsibilities at home and have a greater awareness of the potential dangers of deployment. Their deployed parent may be facing combat, danger, injury, and sometimes death. In some cases, deployed parents may not be able to maintain regular communication with their family and this can create additional strain for everyone.

Children and youth need extra support while their parent is deployed. Sometimes that support can come from the deployed parent through phone calls, emails, and video calls. Other supports can help to fill the gap. Caring adults like teachers, neighbors, faith-based leaders, mentors, coaches, and counselors can provide support and encouragement. They can provide regular check-ins and specifically ask about friendships to help reveal isolation or situations of bullying. Counselors can provide tools and referrals for stress management like support groups, counseling, apps, and military-specific resources. They can also strategize how to prevent or address bullying.

Creating a Military-Friendly School

Some military-connected youth attend schools on base, but many attend schools off-base, including those with parents in active-duty or the National Guard or Reserves. A caring and supportive school climate can help protect military connected youth from bullying and have positive effects on their wellbeing. The first few months of entering a new school and a community are an important time for students. Teachers and other school staff need to be aware of the unique stressors and challenges that military connected youth face so that prevention supports can be in place. They can:

- Create mentor relationships for new students or utilize student leaders to connect new students to school activities and groups.
- Provide emotional support and encouragement to military connected youth to help them become involved and connected in their new school and community. This includes counselors, mentors, school resource officers, and faith-based leaders.
- Encourage the parent-teacher organization and parent volunteers to welcome new military families to the school and connect them to the school community and activities.
- Have school counselors or social workers meet with military connected parents when they first arrive to learn about their specific challenges and help them access school, community, and military resources to address them.
- Conduct school-based activities that promote belonging like assemblies, clubs, group projects, and extracurricular activities where peer connections happen.
- Implement evidence-based bullying prevention and intervention strategies rooted in school policy, so everyone understands what bullying is and how it

will be handled.

- Identify symptoms of stress in military youth and work with parents to share school, community, and military support services.
- Work with parents to connect military youth to military programs for families and youth.

Resources for Military Connected Families and Educators

- CDC's A Comprehensive Technical Package for the Prevention of Youth Violence and Associated Risk Behaviors provides strategies for state and community activities to prevent youth violence and its consequences.
- Military One Source provides information related to caring for military connected youth:
  - Cyberbullying: Recognizing the Signs and Helping Your Child
  - How to Help a Child Who is Being Bullied
  - How to Identify and Address Bullying Behavior
  - Know the Laws that Protect Your Child With Special Needs
  - Preventing Harmful Behavior in Children and Youth
- StopBullying.gov's Get Help Now

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